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ABSTRACT

This brief paper summarizes recommended practices that teachers and administrators serving in supervisory roles can take to ensure the effectiveness of paraeducators working with students who have disabilities. Recommended practices are grouped into four general areas: (1) assign appropriate responsibilities and tasks (preferably by the individualized education program team); (2) provide ongoing, personalized support (a 10-step action planning process for school-based teams is offered); (3) offer training opportunities and resources (provide systematic training and offer incentives); and (4) encourage high standards (become familiar with recognized performance standards for paraprofessionals.) Resources include nine Web sites. (DB)

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Supporting Paraeducators: A Summary of Current Practices

Cynthia Warger

Increasingly, paraeducators, also known as paraprofessionals, are providing instructional and learner support to students with disabilities under the supervision of licensed teachers, a major shift from 40 years ago when paraeducators had primarily clerical responsibilities. Today's paraeducators still perform routine clerical and housekeeping tasks, but now there is a greater emphasis on their instructional and learner support roles.

This digest outlines some actions that teachers and administrators serving in supervisory roles can take to ensure that paraeducators have adequate knowledge and skills for these new instructional support roles. The following practices result in improved paraeducator effectiveness:

- Assign appropriate responsibilities and tasks
- Provide ongoing, personalized support
- Offer training opportunities and resources
- Encourage high standards.

Assign Appropriate Responsibilities and Tasks

Paraeducators should be accepted as part of the school community and valued for their contributions to the child's educational team. However, they should never replace or supplant the classroom teacher.

A clear recognition of paraeducator roles and responsibilities is essential to ensuring that they are being used appropriately. For example, neither research nor common sense supports assigning paraeducators to provide primary or exclusive instruction to students with disabilities. Educators should be very careful not to create a double standard whereby students with disabilities receive their instruction from paraprofessionals, while students without disabilities have ongoing access to qualified professional educators.

The appropriateness of tasks depends on the paraeducator's training, knowledge and skill, as well as the level of supervision and the clarity of instructions provided by the teacher. Overreliance on paraeducators is not only inappropriate for students with disabilities, but can have negative effects on paraeducators as well by putting them in a position that requires them to perform services they are not qualified to perform.

Some examples of tasks that may be appropriate for paraeducators with the proper levels of training and supervision include the following:

- Implementing instructional, curricular and materials adaptation plans (e.g., modifying materials according to teacher's instructions)
- Implementing behavior management plans
- Providing instructional support in small groups or one-on-one instruction
- Taking data, keeping records, and documenting student performance
- Providing feedback to the teacher regarding student performance
- Providing personal care assistance.

It is preferable for the IEP team to determine the paraeducator's roles and responsibilities, which must always specify that the paraeducator supports the teacher, who is the child's primary instructor.

Provide Ongoing, Personalized Support

Substantial benefits can accrue for students and teachers when well-conceived paraeducator supports are implemented. But how do you know what supports are needed?

One practical way is to ask paraeducators what they need. While this strategy may seem obvious, when it is integrated into a schoolwide planning approach, results may be enhanced. According to researcher Michael Giangreco of the Unversity of Vermont, joining forces with colleagues, parents, and community members to take positive steps schoolwide can result in actions that are more effective, strategic, and sustainable. To help schools implement a schoolwide planning process, Giangreco and his colleagues developed A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports ***(http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/parasupport/).*** This 10-step action planning process assists school-based teams in assessing their own status in terms of paraprofessional supports by discussing real issues of concern, prioritizing issues, and taking the following practical steps to improve practice:

1. Inform local school board of intentions to form a team.
2. Select team members.
3. Assess own status and fact-find in relation to paraeducator topics.
4. Prioritize and select topics to work on.
5. Update school board of team progress.
6. Design a plan to address priorities.
7. Identify resources.
8. Implement plan.
9. Evaluate plan and chart next steps.
10. Report impact and needs to school community.

The planning process was successfully field-tested in 50 schools across 13 states. Findings indicate that the planning process can assist schools to self-assess their paraeducator practices, identify

priorities in need of improvement, develop action plans, and implement them. Impact reports from 33 schools documented positive outcomes for adults and students.

Offer Training Opportunities and Resources

Research consistently has shown a need for training in tasks that many paraeducators are currently expected to perform under the supervision of a licensed teacher. In spite of the dramatic shift in paraeducator roles away from clerical work and toward instructional support, systematic training remains notably absent.

On an individual level, teachers must ensure that paraeducators can perform the tasks they are assigned. Basic information should be provided to paraeducators, including information on the child's disability; techniques for positive behavior intervention, communication, and health issues; communication strategies for interacting with parents; and approaches that encourage independence for the child. To do this, however, teachers need supervisory skills such as communication and interview techniques, planning methods, meeting facilitation skills, strategies for providing on-the-job training, an understanding of role distinctions, and task delegation skills (French, 2003). To assist teachers in developing these skills and in transferring knowledge and skills to paraeducators, French developed the CO-TOP model for training teachers to provide paraeducator training. This nationwide model provides curriculum materials and tools that can be implemented in classroom, in districtwide trainings, and at the college level. (For more information, visit ***www.paracenter.org.)***

When offering district training, French also suggests providing incentives. Consider the following suggestions:

- Provide training opportunities in the district at times convenient to paraeducators.
- Give hiring preference to trained personnel.
- Provide stipends and other monetary incentives to paraprofessionals who participate in inservice training.
- Focus training content on issues that are relevant and important to paraeducators.

Also, be aware of opportunities that the state may be offering and support paraeducators in participating in them. For example, both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act have called upon states to ensure a high quality paraeducator workforce. As a result, states are beginning to focus more attention on the skills and knowledge of paraeducators by supporting statewide training events, certification programs, and other professional development opportunities.

Additionally, it is important to offer paraeducators a variety of resources. It is helpful if teachers and administrators refer paraeducators to web sites and print resources such as those listed at the end of this digest.

Encourage High Standards

What do paraeducators need to know and be able to do? At the national, and in some cases the state level, experts have been developing performance standards for paraprofessionals. Knowledge of these efforts is essential for ensuring that individuals can do their jobs effectively by providing a basis for aligning training programs, writing job descriptions, and evaluating job performance.

Resources

Associations of Service Providers Implementing IDEA Reforms in Education (ASPIIRE) Partnership (1999). *Paraprofessional Initiative: Report to OSEP.* Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children. Available at ***www.ideapractices.org.***

Education and Training Voluntary Partnership project at AFT, a coalition of organizations and individuals with an interest in skills standards for the education workforce. Funded by the Department of Labor, the project is developing a national, voluntary system of skill standards for frontline workers in education. For more information, see ***www.etvp.org.***

ERIC/OSEP Special Project (Winter 2003). *Paraeducators: Providing support to students with disabilities and their teachers.* Research Connections in Special Education (number 12). Arlington, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. Available online at ***http://ericec.org/osep/recon12/rc12cov.html.***

French, N. K. (2003). *Managing paraeducators in your school: How to hire, train, and supervise non-certified staff.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals (NRCP) has developed guidelines for paraeducator roles and responsibilities as well as model standards for their training and supervision. The standards are published in *Strengthening and Supporting Teacher/Provider-Paraeducator Teams: Guidelines for Paraeducators Roles, Supervision, and Preparation.* For more information, see ***www.nrcpara.org.***

Pickett, A.L. (1999). *Paraeducators: Factors that influence their performance, development, and supervision. [ERIC Digest E587.]* Arlington, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. ***http://ericec.org/digests/e587.html.***

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Wallace, T., Pickett, A.L., & Liken, M. (Fall 2002). Feature issue on paraeducators supporting students with disabilities and at-risk. *Impact, 15*(2), entire issue. Available on the University of Minnesota's Institute for Community Integration and the Research Center on Community Living web site at ***http://ici.umn.edu/products/newsletters.html.***

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